

A New Note on the Origin, Social Life and Challenges of the Narikuravar Community– A Study

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The Narikuravars are a “gypsy”, semi-nomadic community that spills across borders, but mainly live in Tamil Nadu, India. They are known to face discrimination that translates into low education level, low socio-economic status and lack of appropriate access to health care. There is no distinct physical characteristic that identifies these people but their dress, language and lifestyle set them apart. The Narikorava women, called kurathis, wear coloured skirts, with pleats. They sport beads, shells and cowls around their necks and carry sling bags. The men who wear just loin clothes and turbans often stain their teeth black with copper sulphate and a paste made from acacia arabica. Adept in the art of catching animals and birds, Narikoravas can even trap a jackal, considered to be the most cunning of all animals. It is this ability, which gives them their name Narikorava the jackal people. In order to catch a jackal, the man builds an enclosure made of net, sits inside and mimics the howl of a jackal. When the hapless animal approaches the net to investigate, he clubs it. To trap partridges, which are much sought after for the pot, the Narikoravas use domesticated birds, which act as decoys to catch the wild ones. This is the reason why they are also called Kuruvikaran, or the birdmen. In fact, supplying game birds to town dwellers has been one of their traditional occupations. With the implementation of the Wild Life Protection Act, the Narikoravas had to change their livelihood and they have consequently switched over to making beads and selling knick-knacks.

Keywords: Narikuravar, Tribal identity, Marginalization.

1. Introduction

They are identified as a “Gypsy” population, having similar roots and culture as other Romani communities, and at times facing the same type of stigma. Similar to other “Gypsy” groups, the Narikuravars are an understudied population, and so far no formal study has been done about their health status and health access, except for the current one. Generally recognized as having a low socio-economic level, the Narikuravar struggle with high levels of illiteracy and unemployment, and low access to public services like healthcare. Traditionally, the Narikuravars are hunters, as their name means “fox” or “jackal hunters”. However, since hunting was outlawed in India, the group’s main occupation became selling home-made beaded jewelry or cheap plastic products at festivals and around temples, with part of the community employed in jobs such as collecting garbage. Given their poverty level and distinct culture, they are oftentimes marginalized and even ignored in day-to-day situations, and their main interaction with the people outside the community is through their small businesses. Although they currently spill over state borders, a large part of the population comprised on 8,500 families, or 30,000 individuals, live in Tamil Nadu, and represent less than 0.1% of the state’s population.¹

The Narikuravars face institutional marginalization as well. Historically, they were placed under the Criminal Tribes’ Act of 1871, signaling their threat to the Indian society under British rule. They are currently categorized by the government as one of the Most Backward Classes, which makes them part of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) group. However, the community has been fighting for achieving a Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, given their low socio-economic status and tradition as a nomadic group which migrated from North India. OBC communities are comparatively wealthier than ST groups; for example, in Tamil Nadu 31.2% of STs fall below the poverty line, with only 19% OBCs. Therefore, OBCs tend to receive less financial assistance from the government, and have access to less schemes and public services. Achieving ST status would not only allow the Narikuravars to access more government benefits in order to improve their scarce educational, health and employment opportunities, but would also decrease the competition for resources between the Narikuravars and other groups that are more strongly represented in Tamil Nadu.²

Objectives:

The objectives of this study are to trace Narikuravar’s distinct tradition, unique values and cultural identity in the midst of the globalised society.

Significant of the Study

The Narikuravar community is encountering numerous challenges in their daily lives. Discrimination is a significant problem. Due to their traditional traditions, this minority is widely recognised as socially marginalised. However, their inability to unite under a single identity has hindered their ability to advocate for their fundamental rights through politics. The Narikuravar community has seen persistent degradation both in media representation and in social circumstances. Frequently, individuals are implicated in theft, smuggling, and other nonbillable cases by law enforcement. The state Government, which is responsible for dispensing justice, equity, and fairness to all individuals and communities, has regrettably failed to address their concerns. There is currently no social movement aimed at raising

awareness among individuals to take use of the benefits offered by modern social, political, and economic institutions. Lack of access to educational institutions poses a significant challenge for individuals who lack the necessary social, economic, and geographical/demographical credentials. This research aims to investigate the undisclosed social reality of the Narikoravar Community using well-organized evidence and the ethnographic technique as a way to uncover their social situation. The social exclusion viewpoint is the most pertinent framework for comprehending the various manifestations of exclusion, discrimination, and humiliation experienced by the Narikoravar community in the realms of social, political, educational, and employment domains.

2. Methodology:

It is an inductive study based on interview schedule and observation.

Data Collection:

Personal observation and interviews form the basis of this study. Extensive field survey has been undertaken. Field study by means of questionnaires, interviews, interactions, discussion and case studies have developed the study on right perspective. The information from the local news papers and journals has been added. The published articles and books related to this topic have been verified.

Migration

Any effort to settle them in one location was met with resistance in the early days. Where are they originated from if they are nomads? These individuals have not been given any academic attention, with the exception of a brief comment written by Edgar Thurston in 1905. With the assistance of the students at the Madras Christian College's Statistics Department, Dr. Gift Siromoney carried out a number of research projects on these individuals' lives in the early 1970s. The findings of his investigations were published as monographs. We now have a better understanding of them because to these initiatives.

The Narikuravar of Tamilnadu are said to have come from Gujarat and Rajasthan. They eventually migrated towards South India after encountering difficulties with the Muslim rulers of Delhi. They took refuge in dense forests because they were afraid of their crimes. They resided in Gujarat and Maharashtra's hilly and forested regions. Their life and means of subsistence were reliant on the resources and goods found in forests. They later moved across the states of South India.³

They favored living in the mountainous areas of Tamilnadu. They were driven naturally onto the plains and came into touch with the established populations when the Forest Protection Act was enacted by the British government. They had first advocated the barter system as part of their economic endeavors. Together with the established settlements, they had promoted the forest goods.

The Narikuravar have undergone many alterations as a result of permanent habitation. Their methods of survival have evolved, to start. Their primary source of income used to be hunting. Due to environmental regulations that limit commercial hunting of the majority of species, hunting is currently only permitted in private settings. The manufacturing and sale of beaded

decorations is another source of income. Mixing with Tamils has been made possible by permanent habitation in Narikuravar.

In every aspect of Narikuravar's life, things are changing. They are necessary to their existence and cannot be avoided. Their lives have undergone noticeable and exterior alterations. However, certain fundamental identities and beliefs have not altered. When it comes to altering their core beliefs, they never compromise. If someone attempts to alter the remaining distinctive features, the Narikuravar community will vanish. They dislike changing their surroundings, mode of life, food search, or migratory lifestyle.

Status of Narikuravars in Tamilnadu:

The Narikuravars are a Tamil Nadu-based nomadic group. In Tamil Nadu, there aren't more than 30,000 of them. They are not represented in any body that make decisions. Hunting is the primary occupation of those who were once members of the indigenous tribes. They had to find other ways to make a living, including selling beaded decorations, since they were not allowed to enter the woods to do so. As a result, they move about in search of a market for their beads. Children never get to go to school because they travel everywhere with the grownups. They are now included in the federal government list under OBC and the majority of Tamilnadu's backward castes.⁴

Language

Vagriboli, the Narikuravars' language, is categorized as Indo-Aryan and has elements of Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi. It is scriptless. As part of his study on the Narikuravars, Dr. Gift Siromoney produced a primer to aid in learning this language in Tamil. He also brought out the following booklets: St. Mark's Gospel, St. Luke's Gospel in Vagriboli, and Thirukkural. They retain their own language, "Vagriboli," by speaking it often. Several languages from Northern India are combined to form the "Vagriboli" language. It has been categorized as Indo-Aryan and has elements of Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi. It is scriptless. Their language is incomprehensible to others. They follow the joint family structure to the letter. Every member of the family—parents, grandparents, kids, and grandchildren shares a single plate of meals in a joint family. They don't vary in any way inside their community. They are accommodating and tolerant of one another. Their genealogical history is extensive.

Social Life

They live a very happy and straightforward existence. They have unique identities and physical characteristics. They are also distinguished by their language, attire, and way of life. The Narikuravar community's dress code, eating customs, and lifestyle are distinct from those of mainstream groups. The ladies of Narikurava dress in colorful skirts. They carry sling purses and wear shells and beads around their necks. The guys only dress in turbans and loincloths. The community's male and female members are assisting one another in the kitchen. Her brother or husband will cook or they will purchase meals from outside if the woman is busy caring for a tiny kid or creating jewelry.

They live in communities. They have a close and solid community relationship. They are content with their current situation. The future is never a concern for them. Their fundamental requirements are not even a concern for them. However, they are wandering about in order to survive, without even caring about the chilly rain or the scorching heat. They live a lonely

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existence in a slum. In order to shield their community from outside disturbance, they want to remain distant. This is due to a variety of factors. They have a strong desire to maintain their cultural customs and identities. They are contentedly occupying their time, avoiding social interaction. They have no desire to contaminate their culture. However, they travel freely with everyone to do business.

To maintain control over their community, Narikuravar adheres to a set of unspoken rules and laws. Those who are traveling to distant locations for business should arrive to their colony as soon as they are finished. Before 6 p.m., those doing business in the surrounding regions should arrive at their colony.⁵

One of their distinctive business ventures is tattooing. They extract the smoke particles from the automobiles' exhaust and utilize them as tattoo ink. To inject the color, they utilized three needles. They then suggest that consumers use a mixture of castor oil and turmeric powder. There is only one guy working as a tattoo artist at the bus stop while seated on the sidewalk. They bring home a substantial sum of money from their company. In any case, they squander all of their earnings in a few days.

The Narikoravas' musical chanting and the therapeutic herbs they utilized were also examined. youngsters from Narikorava did better on psychological and IQ exams than the similar youngsters from the nearby hamlet.

Marriage

Boys and girls in Narikuravar are free to choose the person they want to spend their lives with. Around the age of eleven, the Narikuravar females reach adulthood, and they choose their spouses based on their own preferences. Because arranged marriage is so common in Tamil society, this practice is against Tamil tradition. While doing business, the boys and girls of the Narikuravar village go out together. However, avoid having sex before being married. Chastity is important to them. Even at thirteen, parents would perform marriage ceremonies. Even now, child marriages are common. They have marriage ceremonies at night because government authorities threaten to penalize them. They adhere to their inherited customs to the letter. The fact that they never get married to members of other cultures is another significant characteristic. They are not permitted to join their community if any of them break this rule. Both within the nomadic group and inside the specific sect, marriage was being arranged. The family of the bride-groom must cover all marriage-related costs and give the bride's family a dowry. A girl will visit her husband's home after marriage.⁶

In their society, there is no issue with dowries. During the marriage ceremony, the bride-groom gives the bride family dowry. The sum ranges between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 10,000. They are devout followers of the deities Kali and Madurai Meenakshi. They choose from many lines while choosing the bride and groom. They never wed someone who worships the same deity. They maintain this while repairing their marriage. This limitation has some beneficial effects on their next generation because of their small population. Because it has been scientifically shown that people who marry close relatives run the risk of having children who are physically disabled. However, by preserving two groupings, this limitation prevents people in this culture from being married in the same bloodline. As a result, they continue to have positive relationships in their neighborhood. In other societies, they dislike being married to people

from both upper and lower castes. Although male dominance was prevalent in Narikuravar, the female members were not intended to be subjugated or controlled. It served as a safeguard to keep their members and community safe from outsiders and their culture.⁷

If, after marriage, they decide they do not want to live together, they tell the community's elders. They set them up for another marriage. Men and women may get married twice or three times. Additionally, they didn't bother one another after becoming married again. The practice of widowhood does not exist. As long as they choose the correct spouse, both men and women are free to be married as often as they choose. A woman is separated and wedded to someone else if she does not live with her spouse. Her grandchildren are raised by their grandparents if she has any. Remarrying is not required of anybody if they do not want to. They are able to live with their kids.

Women's Status

In the Narikuravar village, women almost have the same rights as males. A society that is gender-just and equitable is shown by the equal involvement of both sexes in decision-making. Unlike other societies, female offspring are not denigrated. Both men and women are seen as their blessings. They are a community of workers. As a result, there is less prejudice in their culture. The Narikuravar community practices gender equality. Family members provide excellent care for the elderly.⁸

They have a set of values of their own. There aren't any commercial prostitutes or sex workers in their neighborhood. Furthermore, we are unable to locate any HIV/AIDS-affected individuals. Suicide attempts are reportedly uncommon in this colony. No one is experiencing stress or mental illness, and there are no instances of dowry deaths. All of this is a result of their community's rigid customs and strong family culture. Although drinking was part of their culture, males were the ones who drank it the most, but women were permitted to do the same.

Among their other traits are their ability to keep their community under control in order to uphold discipline and shield its members from outside threats. They dislike changing their surroundings, mode of life, food search, or migratory lifestyle. They adhere strictly to their faith, customs, behaviors, and interactions with other members of the group. They maintain their religious identity. They seldom ever change their faith. Their religious rites are being observed to the letter. There is something unique about the way they are holding their infants in a cradle that is slung around their neck.⁹

Occupation and Living Conditions:

The ideal nomads don't have a permanent residence. Although they may have a tale about where they came from and where they lived before embarking on their everlasting trip, they do not have a destination where they return after a few months of travel related to their livelihood.

'Partial nomads', or semi-nomads, have permanent residences that they visit once a year. Pastoral people are one of the most prominent groups of semi-nomadic people; they travel with their animal herds after the monsoon harvest and return to their settlements just before the rainy season begins. Their homes often stay shut or they leave their women, children, and elderly people behind to take care of the habitation and plant any winter crops while they are away from their communities for eight to nine months, migrating with their animals in search

of pasture.

The most typical accommodations are tents or jhuggis. The majority of the villages lack access to essential utilities like power, water, and toilets and live in substandard circumstances. In the neighborhood, no family owns any land. Wage work is not available to these areas every day of the week.

Major Issues confronting the Narikuravar Community:

In Indian society, the Narikuravar ethnic group is considered to be highly disadvantaged. They lack access to formal schooling as well as basic survival supplies like drinking water and sanitary facilities.¹⁰

Among the main problems facing the Narikuravar Community are the following:

Discrimination

Hindu varna system states that, they are categorized as untouchables and are not allowed on streets where superior castes reside because of their animal eating, locations of residence, and other behaviors. As a result, in their native Tamil Nadu, they are categorized as OBC rather than Scheduled Tribe. The community has become resentful and protested as a result. Since the Narikuravars lack a stable home and a steady existence, their children do not attend school, which is a crucial component of discrimination in today's society. ¹¹

Illiteracy

For the communities of Narikuravar, education is an illusion. It is hardly surprising that the majority of people in these villages lack literacy, and those who do have an education often only complete the eighth grade. Numerous polls unequivocally show that the issues of livelihood, security, and subsistence prevent the Denotified and Nomadic groups from having adequate access to education. At a very young age, children are introduced to earning money. The belief that education does not guarantee a living and that educated youngsters would be a burden because they will not pursue their conventional vocation after receiving an education deters them from attending school. They are denied access to fundamental rights because to poverty and a lack of citizenship privileges. ¹²

High Crime rates and Unemployment

The Narikuravar neighborhood is also plagued by high unemployment and crime rates. The Narikuravars have lost their customary sources of income due to the ban on hunting foxes and the slaughter of endangered animals and bird species. Young people in Narikurava who are jobless are thus turning to crime and illicit activity. Narikuravars have also sometimes been detained for illegally possessing guns, such as country rifles, which are prohibited by Indian law. ¹³

Low Human Development Index and High Relative Dep-rivation Index.

In other words, their community has a poor status in society when it comes to health, livelihood, profession, and education. They endure protracted times of starvation, lengthier periods of financial bondage, decades of inability to repay their obligations, and a constant lack of resources. Their social, economic, cultural, and educational backwardness is a reflection of this.

Child Marriage

For this community, early marriage poses a serious risk. Nine out of ten children marry before they turn 14. It deprives young people of the chance to develop and gain self-determination. It calls into question these children's fundamental rights to development, protection, health, and education. Compared to their male counterparts, females are compelled to participate in it much more often, which has a greater effect on them.

Lack of Empowerment.

On the periphery of the political system have been the nomadic groups. They have been unable to get a "Identity Card" or any other documentation attesting to their state citizenship since they lack a permanent residency. Their names are absent from every area's voter list. They are thus prohibited from engaging in any activities that call for evidence of citizenship. Despite not having the privileges of citizenship, they are citizens of the country.

Welfare Measures

'Narikurava Seva Sangam' is a social welfare organization that was established in 1996 to educate Narikurava children and help them live settled lives. The life of the Narikuravas have been improved by the activities of other social welfare groups as well.

The State Government approved the establishment of a Welfare Board for the Narikuravas in May 2008, with the Backward Classes Minister serving as its president. However, enrollment is gradual and very low. The many government programs for minorities, including as marriage grants, educational loans, maternity loans, accident insurance, old age pensions, etc., will be available to all members.¹⁴

However, the majority of these individuals are unaware of the welfare board's program. It is crucial to raise their awareness and integrate them into society in order to enable them to live honorable lives. Unquestionably, there is a significant need that has not yet been met: their inclusion in Scheduled Tribes and removal from the list of Backward Classes.¹⁵

3. Conclusion:

In the current period of global social life, all ethnic communities are acknowledging that their participation in the mainstream is a "compulsion" for the relevant governments and other stakeholders rather than a "choice." Particularly when the cause of human rights and human development is discussed as an essential agenda of social development, the situation of the Narikuravar Community is extremely pitiful since they face various forms of discrimination and consequently live in substandard social conditions. To guarantee that the Narikuravar Community receives a targeted intervention to break their current cycle of poverty and deprivation, we need a committed strategic system of Social Welfare Administration. The government and civic organizations must work together to support the Narikuravar Community's advancement to an empowered status in society if they are to be given an equal opportunity to grow and live a socially fulfilling existence.

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